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THE WORLD'S BEST PLAYS

BY CELEBRATED EUROPEAN AUTHORS

BARRETT H. CLARK

GENERAL EDITOR

Modesty: a Comedy in One Act: by Paul Hervieu: Translated by Barrett H. Clark

[Hervieu, Paul Ernest]

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MODESTY

SCENE:—*A parlor. Entrance* C.; *sofa, chairs, writing-desk.* JACQUES *and* HENRIETTE *enter* C., *as from dinner.* HENRIETTE *in sort of ball costume,* JACQUES *in evening dress. They come down stage,* C.

HENRIETTE. Is it so terribly embarrassing, what you have to tell me?

JACQUES. You can easily guess what it is.

HENRIETTE. Not at all! You're so long about it you make me weary—come to the point.

JACQUES. Very well. I'll risk all at a stroke—My dear Henriette, we are cousins. I am unmarried, you—a widow. Will you—will you be my wife?

HENRIETTE. Oh, my dear Jacques, what *are* you thinking of? We were such good friends! And now you're going to be angry with me.

JACQUES. Why?

HENRIETTE. Because I'm not going to answer your demand as you'd like.

JACQUES. You don't—you don't think I'd make a good husband for you?

HENRIETTE. Frankly, no.

JACQUES. I don't please you?

HENRIETTE. As a cousin you are charming; as a husband you would be quite impossible.

JACQUES. What have you against me?

HENRIETTE. Nothing that you're to blame for. It is solely the fault of my character; *that* forces me to refuse you.

JACQUES. And yet I cannot see why you——?

HENRIETTE. (*with an air of great importance*) A great change is taking place in the hearts of us women. We have resolved henceforward not to be treated as dolls, but as creatures of reason. As for me, I am most unfortunate, for nobody ever did anything but flatter me. I have always been too self-satisfied, too——

JACQUES. You have always been the most charming of women, the most——

HENRIETTE. Stop! It's exactly such exaggerations that have begun to make me so unsure of myself. I want you to understand once for all, Jacques, that I have a conscience, and furthermore that it is beginning to develop. I have taken some important resolutions.

JACQUES. What *do* you mean?

HENRIETTE. I have resolved to better myself, to raise my moral and intellectual standards, and to do that I need to be guided, criticised——

JACQUES. But you already possess every imaginable good quality: you are charitable, elegant, refined——

HENRIETTE. (*slightly annoyed*) Please! (*turns away and sits down on settee.* JACQUES *addresses her from behind chair,* R. *front*)

JACQUES. You are spirituelle, discreet, witty——

HENRIETTE. The same old words! Everybody tells me that. I want to be preached to, contradicted, scolded——

JACQUES. You could never stand *that.*

HENRIETTE. Yes, I could. I should be only too happy to profit by the criticism. It would inspire me.

JACQUES. I'd like to see the man who has the audacity to criticise you to your face——

HENRIETTE. That is enough! I trust you are aware that *you* are not the person fit to exercise this commanding influence over me?

JACQUES. How could I? Everything about you pleases me. It can never be otherwise.

HENRIETTE. How interesting!— That's the very reason I rejected your proposal at once. I shan't marry until I am certain that I shall not be continually pestered with compliments and flattery and submission. The man who marries me shall make it his business to remind me of my shortcomings, to correct all my mistakes. He must give me the assurance that I am bettering myself all the time.

JACQUES. And this—husband—you've found him already, have you?

HENRIETTE. What?— Oh, who knows?

JACQUES. Perhaps it's—Albert?

HENRIETTE. Perhaps it is—what of it?

JACQUES. Really!

HENRIETTE. You want me to speak to you quite openly?

JACQUES. Of course.

HENRIETTE. Then—you wouldn't be *piqué* if I said something nice about Albert?

(JACQUES *brings down* C., *chair which is by desk, facing* HENRIETTE.)

JACQUES. Why, he's my friend!

HENRIETTE. Oh! So you too have a good opinion of him?

JACQUES. Certainly.

HENRIETTE. Well, what would you say of him?

JACQUES. (*trying to be fair*) I'd trust him with money—I've never heard that he was a thief.

HENRIETTE. But in other ways?

JACQUES. (*still conscientious*) I believe him to be a man somewhat—somewhat——

HENRIETTE. Wilful? Headstrong?

JACQUES. Um—uncultured, let us say.

HENRIETTE. As you like—but for my part, I find that that air of his inspires absolute confidence. He knows how to be severe at times——

JACQUES. You're mistaken about that; that's only simple brute force. Go to the *Jardin des Plantes*: the ostrich, the boa constrictor, the rhinoceros, all produce the same effect on you as your Albert——

HENRIETTE. My Albert? My Albert? Oh, I don't appropriate him as quickly as all that. His qualifications as censor are not yet entirely demonstrated.

(JACQUES *rises and approaches* HENRIETTE, *who maintains an air of cold dignity.*)

JACQUES. For Heaven's sake, Henriette, stop this nonsense!

HENRIETTE. What nonsense?

JACQUES. Tell me you are only playing with me. That you only wanted to put my love to the test! To make me jealous! To torture me! You have succeeded. Stop it, for Heaven's sake——

(*Warn, phone.*)

HENRIETTE. My dear friend, you make me sorry for you. I really wish I could help you, but I cannot. I have given you a perfect description of the husband I should choose, and I am heart-broken that you bear so small a resemblance to him.

JACQUES. Only promise me that you will think over your decision.

HENRIETTE. It is better to stop right now.

JACQUES. Don't send me away like this. Don't leave me——

HENRIETTE. If I didn't, I might give you false hopes. I have only to tell you that I shall never consent to be the wife of a man who cannot be the severest of censors.

JACQUES. (*kneeling*) I beg you!——

HENRIETTE. No, no, no, Jacques! Spare me that. (*a telephone rings in the next room*) There's the 'phone——

JACQUES. Don't go!

(HENRIETTE *rises hastily and goes to door.* JACQUES *tries for a moment to stop her.*)

HENRIETTE. I must. Go away, I tell you. I'll be angry if I find you here when I return.

JACQUES. Henriette!

HENRIETTE. (*coming* DOWN L. *to table*) Not now! Please, Jacques. (*exit*)

JACQUES. No, I can't leave it that way. I shall be the husband who will make her happy. But how? That is the question.—(*pause*) Ah, Albert!

(*Enter* ALBERT. *He shakes hands with* JACQUES.)

ALBERT. How are you, rival?

JACQUES. (*gravely*) My friend, we are no longer rivals.

ALBERT. How's that?

JACQUES. I have just had a talk with Henriette; she won't marry either one of us, that's clear.

ALBERT. Did she mention me?

JACQUES. Casually.

(*Both sit down*: ALBERT *on sofa,* JACQUES *on chair near it.*)

ALBERT. What did she say?

JACQUES. Oh, I wouldn't repeat it; it wouldn't be friendly.

ALBERT. I *must* know.

JACQUES. Very well then—she said that you had not succeeded—nor I—to find the way to her heart. Between you and me, we've got a high-minded woman to deal with, a philosopher who detests flattery. It seems that you have been in the habit of paying her compliments——

ALBERT. I? I never pay compliments.

JACQUES. Whatever you did, she didn't like it. Moreover—since you want the whole truth—you seem to her a bit—ridiculous.

ALBERT. I beg your pardon?

JACQUES. The very word she used: ridiculous. She wants a husband who will act as a sort of conscience pilot. Evidently, you haven't appealed to her in that capacity.

ALBERT. And yet, sometimes, I used to be rather sharp with her——

JACQUES. You did it too daintily, perhaps; you must have lacked severity. I'll wager you smiled, instead of scowled—that would have been fatal!

ALBERT. I don't understand?

JACQUES. Don't you see? Henriette is a singular woman; to get her, you have to tell her that you don't like her—her pride demands it—. Tell her all her bad qualities, right out.

ALBERT. (*feeling himself equal to the task*) Don't worry about that! (*rises and walks about*) I know that women love to be told things straight out.

JACQUES. I'm not the man for that; neither are you, I suppose?

ALBERT. No?—Jacques, I'm awfully obliged to you; you've done me a good turn——

JACQUES. Not another word, Albert——

ALBERT. You want to do me one more favor?

JACQUES. (*devotedly*) Anything you like!

ALBERT. Promise me you'll never let Henriette know that you told me this?

JACQUES. I promise; but why?

ALBERT. You know she has to understand that it's according to my true character, the way I'm going to talk to her.

JACQUES. Oh, you're going at it strenuously.

ALBERT. I am.

JACQUES. Good; your decision honors you.

ALBERT. Let's not have Henriette find us together; that might show me up. Would you mind disappearing as soon as possible?

JACQUES. With pleasure. I've got an errand to do. I'll look in again and get the news.

(JACQUES *rises.*)

ALBERT. Thanks, Jacques.

JACQUES. Au revoir, Albert. (*exits after shakins hands cordially with* ALBERT)

HENRIETTE. (*re-entering as* ALBERT *assumes a rather severe attitude*) How are you? (*pause*) Have you seen Jacques?

ALBERT. (*with a determined air*) No, Henriette, no. Thank God!

HENRIETTE. Why—?

ALBERT. Because it pains me to see men in your presence whom you care nothing for.

HENRIETTE. (*delighted*) You don't like that? (*sitting down on the sofa*)

ALBERT. No, I don't. And I'd like to tell you——

HENRIETTE. About my relations with Jacques?

ALBERT. Oh, he's not the only one.

HENRIETTE. Heaps of others, I suppose?

ALBERT. (*sits on chair near sofa*) You suppose correctly, Madame: heaps.

HENRIETTE. Really?

ALBERT. You are a coquette.

HENRIETTE. You think so?

ALBERT. I am positive.

HENRIETTE. I suppose I displease you in other ways, too?

ALBERT. In a great many other ways.

HENRIETTE. (*really delighted*) How confidently you say that!

ALBERT. So much the worse if you don't like it!

HENRIETTE. Quite the contrary, my dear Albert; you can't possibly imagine how much you please me when you talk like that.—It's perfectly adorable.

ALBERT. It makes very little difference to me whether I please you or not. I speak only according to my temperament. Perhaps it is a bit authoritative, but I can't help *that.*

HENRIETTE. Albert, you are superb.

ALBERT. Oh, no: I'm just myself.

HENRIETTE. Oh, Albert, if you should only be the——

ALBERT. I haven't the slightest idea what you were about to say, but I'll guarantee that there's not a more inflexible temper than mine in Paris.

HENRIETTE. I can easily believe it. (*pause*) Now tell me in what way you think I'm coquettish. (*sitting on edge of sofa in an interested attitude.* ALBERT *takes out cigarette, lights and smokes it*)

ALBERT. That's easy; for instance, when you go to the theater, to a reception, to the races. As soon as you arrive, all the men who know you flock about in dozens; and those who don't know you come to be presented. You're the talking-stock of society. Now I should be greatly obliged if you would tell me to what you attribute this notoriety?

HENRIETTE. (*modestly*) Well, I should attribute it to the fact that I am—agreeable, and pleasant——

ALBERT. There are many women no less agreeable

HENRIETTE. (*summing up all her modesty to reply*) You force me to recognize the fact——

ALBERT. And I know many women fully as pleasant as you who don't flaunt their favors in the face of everybody; *they* preserve some semblance of dignity, a certain air of aloof distinction that it would do you no harm to acquire

HENRIETTE. (*with a gratitude that is conscious of its bounds*) Thanks, thanks so much. (*drawing back to a corner of the sofa*) I am very obliged to you——

ALBERT. Not at all. (*aside*) Good!

HENRIETTE. In the future, I shall try to behave more decorously.

ALBERT. Another thing——

HENRIETTE. (*the first signs of impatience begin to appear*) What? Another thing to criticize?

ALBERT. A thousand! (*settling himself more comfortably in his chair*)

HENRIETTE. Well, hurry up.

ALBERT. You really must rid yourself of your excessive and ridiculous school-girl sentimentality.

HENRIETTE. I wonder just on what you base your statement. Would you oblige me so far as to explain that?

ALBERT. With pleasure. I remember one day in the country you were in tears because a *poor* little mouse had fallen into the claws of a *wretched* cat; two minutes later, you were sobbing because the *poor* cat choked in swallowing the *wretched* little mouse.

HENRIETTE. That was only my kindness to dumb animals. I never thought it was wrong to be kind to dumb animals. (*she is about to rise when* ALBERT *stops her with a gesture*)

ALBERT. That would be of little importance, if it weren't that you were of so contradictory a nature that you engage in the emptiest, most frivolous conversations, the most——

HENRIETTE. (*slightly disdainful*) Ah, you are going too far! You make me doubt your power of insight. I am interested only in noble and high things——

ALBERT. And yet as soon as the conversation takes on a serious turn, it's appalling to see you; you yawn continually and look bored to extinction.

HENRIETTE. There you are right—partly.

ALBERT. You see!?

HENRIETTE. (*sharp and even antagonistic*) Yes, I have that unfortunate ability to understand things before people have finished explaining them; I understand everything too soon. While the others are waiting for the explanation, I can't wait, and I just fly on miles ahead——

ALBERT. Hm—that sounds probable; I shan't say anything more about that just now. But while I'm on the subject, I have more than once noticed that you are guilty of the worst vice woman ever possessed——

HENRIETTE. And what, if you please?

ALBERT. Vanity.

HENRIETTE. I, vain? Oh, you're going too far!

ALBERT. (*unruffled*) Not a word! Every time I tell you of a fault, you twist it round to your own advantage. Whereas, you are really worse than I have painted you, you are——

HENRIETTE. (*rising and gathering her skirts about her with virtuous indignation*) You are rude, monsieur! I suppose you would find fault with me if I considered myself more polite than the person whom I have the honor to address?

ALBERT. I hope, Mademoiselle, that you do not intend that remark as personal?

HENRIETTE. I certainly do. (*she crosses to the other side of the stage, and sits down.* ALBERT *rises and goes up to her*)

ALBERT. Henriette! No! (*laughing*) I see your little trick!

HENRIETTE. What do you mean?

ALBERT. You can't deceive me by pretending to be angry. You wanted to see whether I could withstand your temper. Let us now proceed to the next chapter: your manner of dressing.

HENRIETTE. (*now really outraged*) My manner of dressing? You dare! (HENRIETTE *crosses* L. *Front,* ALBERT *following her*)

ALBERT. Yes, that will end to-day—

HENRIETTE. And then you'll begin again to-morrow!

ALBERT. Yes.

HENRIETTE. And do you think for one minute that I'll go on listening to you while you insult me to my face? Are you crazy? You are the vain one, to think you can come here and insult a woman to her face. *You* are the frivolous one, *you* are the——

ALBERT. (*slightly perturbed*) Be careful what you are saying!

HENRIETTE. I'll take care of that.—Let me tell you that you are a detestable cynic. You are disgustingly personal; always dwelling on details, on the least——

ALBERT. Which is as much as calling me a blockhead?

HENRIETTE. Just about. You would be completely so, if you didn't read your morning paper regularly; so regularly that I know in advance exactly what you are going to say to me during the day.

ALBERT. Why not call me a parrot?

HENRIETTE. That would compliment you, for you don't speak as well as a parrot; a parrot's memory never gets clouded, a parrot has at least the common politeness to——

ALBERT. (*between his teeth*) I won't stand for this. I wonder how you could have endured me so long if you thought me such a fool.

HENRIETTE. I considered you harmless.

ALBERT. Are you aware that you have wounded me cruelly?

HENRIETTE. *You* have wounded *me*. Thank Heaven, though, we had this discussion! Now I'll know how to conduct myself toward you in the future.

ALBERT. Thank Heaven for the same thing! It was high time, too. I grieve to think that only last night, I had fully made up my mind to ask you to be my wife!

HENRIETTE. My dear friend, if you ever do so, I shall show you the door immediately.

(*Enter* JACQUES *hurriedly*. HENRIETTE *runs to him as for protection.*)

JACQUES. What's all this noise about? What's the matter?

HENRIETTE. Oh, Jacques—I'm so glad you've come.

ALBERT. Deuced glad you came when you did; you put an end to our pleasant little tête-à-tête.

JACQUES. But what's happened?

HENRIETTE. Well, Monsieur here——

ALBERT. No, it was Mademoiselle who——

(HENRIETTE *and* ALBERT *each take an arm of* JACQUES *and bring him down stage,* C. *His attention is constantly changing from one to the other, as they address him in turn.*)

HENRIETTE. Just think, Jacques——

ALBERT. Jacques, she had the audacity to——

HENRIETTE. Stop! I'm going to tell him first——

JACQUES. You're both too excited to explain anything.—Albert, you take a little stroll and cool off.

ALBERT. (*retreating toward the door*) Charmed

HENRIETTE. Then I can draw a free breath.

JACQUES. (*to* ALBERT) I'll fix up things while you're away.

ALBERT. (*to both*) I won't give in.

HENRIETTE. Neither will I.

JACQUES. Tut, tut!

ALBERT. Adieu, Mademoiselle.

HENRIETTE. Adieu.

JACQUES. Adieu, Albert. (*exit* ALBERT)

HENRIETTE. Thank goodness, we're rid of him!

JACQUES. (*sympathetically*) Tell me all about it.

HENRIETTE. (*sits down on sofa, inviting* JACQUES *by a gesture to do the same. He sits beside her*) That man invented the most abominable things about me; even criticized me to my face!

JACQUES. He did!?

HENRIETTE. It was so ridiculous—makes me sick to think about it.

JACQUES. My dear Henriette, don't think about it. Albert must have behaved like a brute to make you so angry.

HENRIETTE. Yes, don't you think so?—*You* think I'm right?

JACQUES. (*loyally*) Of course I do.

HENRIETTE. (*at her ease once more*) You encourage me, Jacques.

JACQUES. When I saw you were angry, I said to myself at once: "Henriette is right."

HENRIETTE. Really, did you?

JACQUES. I said it because I knew you were by nature peace-loving and considerate——

HENRIETTE. (*with profound conviction*) Well, I think that's the least that could be said of me.

JACQUES. In any event, you are always tactful, you always——

HENRIETTE. *You* know me, Jacques!

JACQUES. I flatter myself. I felt instinctively that you could not be wrong. You have always been so admirably poised, so polite on all occasions.

HENRIETTE. (*with perfect simplicity*) Frankly now, do I ever lose my temper when I am with you?

JACQUES. (*in good faith*) Never. With me you are always patient, gracious, modest——

HENRIETTE. But I recall a little while ago, I made you suffer——

JACQUES. Yes, I was unhappy. But "if after every storm comes such a calm!"——

HENRIETTE. It was all my fault. You understand me; you are truly a friend.

JACQUES. Nothing more? (*rising, but standing near her.* HENRIETTE *blushingly looks down at her shoe*)

HENRIETTE. Oh——

JACQUES. Prove to me that you mean that sincerely.

HENRIETTE. What do I have to do? (*same business*)

JACQUES. Place your future in my hands: marry me.

HENRIETTE. (*with downcast eyes*) I was just thinking about it. (*same business but with repressed joy*)

JACQUES. (*about to embrace her*) Ah!

HENRIETTE. Wait! (*complete metamorphosis. Her joy is still present, but it has taken on a playful, serio-comic aspect. Rising, and putting her hand in his*)

JACQUES. Why do you hesitate?

HENRIETTE. Jacques, do you remember what I told you not long ago?

JACQUES. Yes.

HENRIETTE. In spite of that, are you quite sure that I am not vain? and coquettish?

JACQUES. I am certain.

HENRIETTE. You are also firmly resolved to be my moral guide, such a guide as I spoke to you about?

JACQUES. (*stolid as ever*) I am.

HENRIETTE. I make one condition.

JACQUES. Name it.

HENRIETTE. On your word of honor?

JACQUES. On my word of honor. Tell me.

HENRIETTE. Will you swear to tell me, without pity, every time you find me at fault? Swear.

JACQUES. I swear.

HENRIETTE. Then you have my promise.

JACQUES. (*as they embrace*) Dearest!

CURTAIN.

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BARRETT H. CLARK

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